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Reflecting on practice: using the Diploma of Frontline Management to develop learning partnerships in the workplace.

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Abstract

This paper is based on research undertaken during a management training project in a company within the Australian petrochemical industry. The company selected a competency-based model, the Diploma in Frontline Management (FMI), as a way of improving their first line leaders. Increased international competitiveness was one of the principal reasons for the adoption of a competency-based model.

This paper argues that competencies, by themselves, are a fool's learning paradise that did not have any real positive impact in the workplace. To be effective competencies need to be appropriated and moulded to suit both the needs of individual workers, their managers and the broader organization. This appropriation and moulding process can be highly contested but through this process new organizational knowledge is created. Second, there is a need for learning partnerships to be formed at the workplace. In companies that are subjected to intense competition the development of partnerships is difficult to achieve.

This paper concludes that workplace learning can assume strategic characteristics when new workplace knowledge is created in a context of a learning partnership.

Introduction

This paper is a case study of the implementation of the Frontline Management Initiative (FMI) in a petrochemical company, Petrochem. In the company the program was re-badged as the Firstline Leadership Initiative (FLI). The FMI is a nationally recognised management program aimed at supervisors or firstline managers. It is a competency based program containing eleven modules.

The Diploma in Front Line Management emerged from Report of The Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills (commonly called the Karpin Report) (Karpin 1995). The Task Force was commissioned by the Federal Cabinet in 1991, established in 1992 and reported to the Minister for Employment, Education and Training in February 1995. The Task Force's objective was to advise the Federal Government on ways to improve management development and business leadership within Australian enterprises. If the 1980s can be seen as Australia's decade of creative destruction, to use Kelly's phrase, (1992) the Karpin report can be portrayed as part of the attempted re-construction.

The term 'competency' has infiltrated popular discourse and whole areas of our everyday existence are measured against a 'competency standard'. Applicants for

employment ignore competencies are their peril. Parents, students, managers, workers all seem to be subjected to this new form of measurement.

There has been a considerable debate about the nature and role of competencies. The nature of competence is contested. When used in popular discourse there is an implication that the answer to a question about competence is either 'yes' or 'no'. Competency carries notions of universal rationality. The packaging of the FMI, national accreditation, eleven competencies, evidence requirements and assessment profiles only serve to reinforce this meaning. Mulcahy (2000) found that rather than this notion of uniformity, in practice there were a multiplicity of competencies.

However competence can also be used as a vehicle to improve. In this vein Owen (Owen, Meyer et al. 2001) argues in an evaluation of the Victorian State Department of Natural Resources and Energy that there is a need to "ensure that the FMI program takes participants beyond recognition of their existing levels of competence to higher levels of competence'. (p13) Competence is not static but rather should be seen as developmentally focused.

There is a tendency to view competence through the prism of an economic discourse. The Karpin report argued for that the frontline manager was the key to a firm's competitiveness and that the way to improve their performance was by ensuring that they were more competent. Stevenson (1993) is critical of the economic assumptions underpinning competency based training and argues that competency based training is unlikely to improve the performance of the workforce. The competency movement is just another attempt to codify knowledge but the danger in codification is that it ignores tacit knowledge. "Overall I think the globalising economy will continue to need to rely on the idiosyncratic attributes of individuals' learning from rich experiences and developing their meaning from among the various connects that they build in their lives." (Stevenson 2001).

The Karpin Report identified six conditions under which a competency system could be used effectively. Through the identification of these conditions the report implicitly acknowledged that competencies were not a panacea for addressing the ills or even the needs of individual enterprises. The conditions identified were:
1. Determined by current and emerging business requirements
2. Based on successful management performance
3. Simple to use.
4. Associated with equally important key technical competencies.
5. Enterprise focused.
6. Developmentally oriented

Not withstanding the caveat that the effectiveness of a competency based system of management training is dependent on a series of contextual conditions, such as those identified above, the Report also assumes that management competencies can be identified, articulated and assessed. At the heart of competency is the belief that it is possible to identify what it is, that a manager does.

The FMI provides a useful framework for workplace analysis and development. However, there are dangers in see it as a panacea for first line manager development.

The FMI is unlikely to provide much solace when used in conjunction with problem solving, human relations and in negotiating contested workplaces.

If FMI is to be used as a vehicle for development of a first line leader there is a need for the formation of a partnership. 'Partnership' like team is a term that is used somewhat glibly especially in the context of the workplace. In this paper 'partnership' is used to denote something that is more intimate but ordinary, part of the everyday pattern of life. More appropriate images would be of longer-term tennis partners, life partners or even partners in crime. Common to each of these images is an understanding that 'we are in this together' and we are responsible for forging the future. This responsibility for the future provides a link with the developmental aspect of the FMI. Central to an orientation to the future is an understanding of how knowledge is created, appropriated and fashioned into action. Senge (1992) differentiates between discussion and dialogue. He argues that the object of discussion is to win. I think that this is an overstatement because in situations where it is impossible to win the object becomes, 'not to lose'. Thus another objective of discussion is to maintain the status quo. On the other hand, dialogue is to "gain insights that simply could not be achieved individually." (Senge 1992).

The Case
Petrochem, like all other companies in the petrochemical industry has been caught in a pincer movement that is driven by regulation and de-regulation. One arm of the pincer is the de-regulation of the Australian economy typified by low tariffs and financial market reform. Parallel with this de-regulation has been more efficient transport and communication links that have resulted in substantially increased international competition. The lowest cost overseas competitor now sets prices for petrochemical products in Australia. In this competitive environment profitability is determined by three factors: the capacity to operate in accordance with health, safety and environmental standards, the capacity to gain access to feed-stocks at competitive prices and finally a capacity to improve productivity as measured by total cash cost per tonne. In an industry that is animated by economies of scale Petrochem operates with old and complex facilities that are small by world standards, high cost structures as a result of high maintenance and high wages.

The second arm of the pincer movement has been, conversely, increased regulation of the workplace, work practices and the environment. Increased regulation has been particularly marked in the areas of occupation health, safety and environment. Petrochem, along with other firms in the petrochemical industry has become very conscious of the need to meet fulfil regulatory compliance standards. There have been two different but inter-related responses to this increased regulation. First, a systems response whereby the procedures and processes within the plant were examined, modified and documented. For example, whereas in the past there was a reliance on local, even idiosyncratic knowledge of particular equipment, now there are documents outlining standard operating procedures. This systems approach extended to human resources and included a comprehensive development system; position descriptions, competence profiles, targeted selection processes, a performance review.

Second, the company, like others in the industry turned to training as a means of demonstrating their commitment to regulatory compliance. The increased emphasis on training received a boost in the aftermath of an explosion at the Longford Gas plant in October 1997. Much attention, effort and money has been expended in an attempt to improve the performance of 'line' leadership (first and second line leaders and operations managers). Traditional classroom training was completed covering topics such as problem solving, performance management and safety leadership. The trend into outdoor experiential learning for team building and leadership development was followed. 'Riskier' programs such as 'The Authentic Leader', which built on a philosophical and personal development basis were also attempted.

The business performance impact derived through the influence or leverage of 'line' management is regarded as significant in manufacturing organisations. It was recognized by several stakeholders in the company that one way of improving company profitability was to improve the capability of the line management. The aim was that by managing more effectively the impact of an old and complex plant would be minimized.

Frontline Management Initiative and Action Learning

While the content of the leadership development program at Petrochem was established – the Frontline Management Initiative, the methodology was never discussed openly. Ironically, one person made the decision, although over time one of the key partnerships that was created and sustained for the duration of the project added flesh to this original decision.

The term 'Action Research' has come a long way from the concept first enunciated by Kurt Lewin (1946). Nowadays it is used more as an umbrella term than as a tightly defined approach to research. Torbert (1999), uses the term 'developmental action inquiry', Zeichner & Noffke (2001), prefer 'practitioner research' and Zuber-Skerritt (2001) fuses action learning and action research. Park (1999) adopts the term 'action-orientated research' to refer to "knowledge generating activities that result in action" (p142). It is within this field that he locates 'participatory research'. The essential difference between participatory research and other forms of 'action-generating research is that it "issues from the felt needs of the community" (142) which can be distinguished from those research activities aimed at improving the workings of an organisation.

Being critical and a commitment to action are the touchstones of action research strategies. It has a number of attractive advantages in that it is overtly critical, and at its core there is the commitment to action or praxis. The term *praxis* is used here in the same sense that Carr and Kemmis (1986) use the term. They differentiate between habitual or customary action on the one hand and the "committed action" of praxis on the other. Another attractive feature of the action research model is the commitment to participation. Without participation the action research would lose its *raison d'etre*. This reveals a value to the type of action that results from critical inquiry. It is action that is linked to the lives of the community, in this case the community at the workplace.

The complexity of workplaces and other social settings have prompted the development of different frameworks for analysis. Foley (2001) refers to five dimensions, the intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, social and historical. Torbet (1999) and Reason (2001) both employ first, second and third person 'research/practice. First person inquiry focuses on the researcher, their values, attitudes, motivation and behaviour. Second person inquiry commences when the inquirer engages with the other. An essential feature of second person inquiry is the development of a trusting relationship. This becomes even more critical when the inquirer does not 'come from' within the group but is instead an outsider. Torbet speaks of the need to create mini communities of inquiry and of the need to "listen for the music". While both Torbet and Reason approach first and second person inquiry in a similar fashion, they diverge in their presentation of third person inquiry/practice. Common to both though is the challenge of moving beyond the immediate group and engaging with the 'other'. Reason argues that third person inquiry is at the cutting edge of action research for "it presents us with the challenge of creating large scale participatory democracy and of dealing with some of the major issues which confront our societies – issues of scale, Of co-ordination between different stakeholders and interests groups, of 'joined-up government'". This is one of the greatest challenges of the phenomenon of globalisation and the accompanying impact of de-regulation of markets. How is it possible to co-ordinate, let alone ensure participatory democracy? The sheer magnitude of increasing economic interdependence, of multinational companies and global industries means that it is extremely difficult for participants to engage in dialogue. It raises questions of language, culture and concepts of self. Given these difficulties, difficulties that could be loosely term, the difficulties of identity, it is even more difficult to devise action.

Torbet's concept of the third person centres on the notion of acting in an objectively timely fashion. While acknowledging the difficulty of a precise definition of the term, he articulates three criteria that should be met over time. First, the inquiry is self generating in that it leads to further unpredictability and further inquiry. Second, it generates awareness and attributes meaning and effects to action. Third, it is instrumental, practical and emancipatory.

Pacts and Partnerships

The stated objective of the FMI program was to promote change in the workforce. The official reasoning was that the FMI program would provide the firstline leaders with the necessary competencies to improve the teams of people for whom they were responsible. This in turn would lead to an increase in productivity. An unstated objective was that the program would lead to what Liedtka (1998) refers to as strategic conversations. These conversations are capable of creating "a self sustaining system in which both the strategic thinking literacy of individuals and the institutional capacity for strategic change and renewal are supported." (Liedtka 1998) These strategic conversations occur in the context of a partnership. While this unstated objective was relatively clear in the eyes of the researchers it did form an explicit part of our conversations in the early stages of the project. Rather there was a gradual

clarification and growth in understanding of how the FMI project could be used as a vehicle to promote strategic change.

There is a distinction between a pact and a partnership. At Petrochem, considerable effort was expended in maintaining a series of pacts. Conversely, little attention was devoted to establishing and developing learning partnerships. The power of the existing pacts inhibited the emergence of these partnerships. Pacts or treaties serve a useful purpose. Mutually Assured Destruction or MAD was at the heart of an implicit pact between the Western Powers, led by the United States, and the Soviet Union. It maintained a peace between the superpowers throughout the Cold War, although conflict often raged on the periphery. The Treaty of Westphalia was another pact that underpinned international relations for more than three centuries. Pacts have a number of advantages especially in controlling conflict between the parties and in developing a mutual understanding in the face of external threats. They are hardly creative as demonstrated by MAD. Moreover, when there is significant change in the environment they do not provide a road map for future action, as is evidenced by the debate about the Treaty of Westphalia in the context of globalisation. To this extent they are reactionary.

Pacts also operate in organisations and largely serve the same purposes that they do in international relations. Union-management agreements are an obvious workplace pact. However pacts can also operate within workers' organisations and within management. Despite the argument that first line leaders needed to improve there was no significant dialogue, at operations management and second line leader level, on what specific aspects of their performance needed to be improved or how this would be achieved through the program. While it was recognised that first line leaders needed to less technical and more 'leadership' focussed there was no common understanding about what this actually meant in practice. The absence of such discussion was a contributing factor to the confusion that emerged as the FMI process progressed.

It is possible that the lack of a dialogue on the more detailed workings of the program and its objectives constituted an easy decision. Most obviously, the Operations Managers were not spending money from their own budget, and without committing to personal action, had little to lose. More critically it can be interpreted as a pact to avoid confronting difficult issues. This was the pact of silence, perhaps the most negative of all pacts.

The majority of 58 participants in the FMI program found the process frustrating. Many reported that the reality was different to their expectations. Unfortunately, the material with which they had been provided reinforced their expectations that this was just another training program. Throwing these materials into the rubbish bin was on one level, symbolic. At another level it was a powerful reminder that the most important aspect of the program was the partnerships that were formed. At the outset the participants were presented with two questions: Do you want to do this? How do you want to do this? The aim of these questions was to challenge any expectation that this was just another of Petrochem training program and also to invite the participant into a dialogue with the intention of forming a partnership. In this initial period contact was maintain with all participants either formally or informally. However,

after approximately two months it became clear that a number of the participants did not want to continue the dialogue and as a consequence conversations with these first line leaders dwindled and eventually ceased altogether. The remainder continued with the program. Of this second group a series of partnerships were formed, within a site, across sites, with the coach and with some members of either second line leaders or operations management.

At Petrochem training constituted part of a broader workplace pact. At significant amount of time was devoted to training that was associated with regulatory compliance. Principally this was related to the areas of safety, health and environment (SHE) and was often referred to as core training. Core training is composed of two different elements, required and mandatory. Required training refers to training that a technician must undertake prior to operating a particular piece of equipment and mandatory training refers to training that must be completed 12 months of a technician commencing. Each shift has a number of fixed positions and the required training varies according to the position. In addition to the required and mandatory training each position also has a training 'agenda'. Part of this agenda was defined by the Victorian WorkCover Authority, however the majority of the agenda had been established on the basis of industry practice. The training that was undertaken for regulatory compliance was competency based. However the definitions of competence varied both between sites and even across different shifts. Thus, while the intention of the competency system was to ensure uniformity this did not eventuate.

Training was an integral part of the milieu of industrial relations at the company. This milieu, built on a conflictual model of workplace relations prevents the formation of learning partnerships. The production process at Petrochemp was continuous and as a consequence the operators (the technicians) of the plant and their supervisor, the Shift Team Leaders (STL) worked a rotating shift. Five teams were required to operate each of the four plants. They worked a 12 hour shift with the changeover being 7 AM or 7 PM. Every five weeks each shift has a seven hour training day. This was sometimes referred to as "the utility day". The day arose as a consequence of the transition from a forty hour week to a 35 hour week. Over a five week block the technicians only worked 168 hours instead of 175 hours (5 weeks of 35 hours). Thus there was a shortage of seven hours. It was agreed within the industry that these seven hours would be used for training.

The majority of the STLs reported that they had ambivalent feelings about this training day. On the one hand STLs reported that some of the training was most beneficial. Further probing revealed that they considered beneficial when:
- The trainer demonstrated technical expertise
- The trainer demonstrated training expertise including the ability to develop a rapport with the participants. Active participation in the sessions was specifically mentioned.
- It was well organized: commenced punctually was specifically mentioned.
- The outcomes of the training were clear and moreover were directly related to the concerns of the workplace.

Conversely, there was an overwhelming feeling that the training days could be more effective. There were reports that it was often poorly organized and 'delivered'. A common complaint was that the trainers spent too much time talking at the participants. The STLs reported that the training was normally viewed as an imposition rather than an opportunity to improve and that as a consequence the 'utility' day was optional – it was a good day to have a 'sickie' to finish early.

Even in cases where there was general agreement that the training was worthwhile, training practices and the local understanding of training prevented improvements from occurring. Fire is an ever-present danger in a petrochemical plant and staff, especially operators are required to undergo compulsory training in fire management and prevention. While the subjects reported that some of this training, especially the practical training which was conducted off-site, much of the other compulsory training was treated in a derisory fashion. The fire training was competency-based. In practice this meant that company employees underwent classroom-based training and immediately after this training they were tested in order to determine whether they were competent. Several subjects in this research reported that a written test was used to determine competence. The sources reported that during the testing for competence the instructor distributed the written examination and then left the room. Sometime later the instructor re-entered the room and proceeded to announce the correct answers. The participants in this training had at least two opportunities to check their answers and change them if necessary: first while instructor was out of the room, and second, during the announcement of the correct answers. At the end of the training session all participants were deemed to be competent.

In the early stages of the project it was acknowledged, by the researchers and key stakeholders in the Human Resources Department, that the second line leaders needed to be actively and positively involved. The curriculum needed to be contextualised not just at company level but also at the individual plant level. It was recognized by the initiators of the initiative that the role of the second line leader and plant managers would be critical if the desired benefits were to be achieved. At Petrochem there were three plant managers and seven second line leader positions. The objective of creating learning partnerships between first and second line leaders was complicated by the changes in personnel and organizational re-structures. Four people filled the three operations manager role and twelve people filled the seven 2LL positions during 2002. All but one of these changes was a consequence of either rotating staff or re-structuring.

A, was actively engaged, visited the people on the bus and asked how he could assist them to reach the destination. Moreover there was a sense that the destination was negotiated rather than any notion that it was pre-determined. This relationship could be classified as a collaborative partnership. B was also actively engaged with the first line leaders. Performance management was a striking feature of this partnership. In terms of the bus he could be compared to the inspector giving instructions to the drivers and ensuring that they were complying with the rules of the road. C was appointed two months after the commencement of the project. He reported that he was keen to become involved but also indicated that he was overwhelmed with trying to get on top of his other work. There did not appear to be any sustained attempt to forge a partnership. D reported, five months after the start of the project, that he had

not "done anything about the DFM with my guys". However from this point he actively engaged his 1LL. During this period three of 1LL who had dropped out of the program rejoined.

Two of the 2LLs were skeptical of FMI/FLI. One was particularly adept at pact making and could be considered the Henry Kissinger of Petrochem. He didn't think that his first line leaders needed to be engaged with the program at all. While not overt in opposition, he quietly gave his imprimatur to their non-engagement. One first line leader from this part of the plant became involved, albeit rather late in the formal process, and as a consequence did not complete the official course. He became the public defense advocate for their non-engagement even while there were significant issues that could have been resolved. The second, was similar to the first skeptic in that he didn't think that his leaders needed any development but he was more tolerant. It emerged that this second line leader saw that he could use the leadership development program as ammunition in his plan to reduce the number of first line leaders. After nine months he learnt that some of the people he wanted to retain would not successfully complete the program while some who he wanted to exit the company would. He sought to forge a pact with the FMI coach with a view to achieving his redundancy objectives. The final second line leader saw the process in control terms. His position seemed to be that the FMI would provide his first line leaders with the tools to be able to bring the people who they supervised into line. . Once the first line leaders had demonstrated they were competent they would be in a position to instruct their charges. The second line leader did not articulate any real issues that impacted on those he supervised and when he eventually did they appeared irrelevant.

Conclusion

The FMI project at Petrochem was contentious for three reasons

First, the notion of competency was in contention. On the one hand there was an acknowledgement that competency in the workplace was dependent on a range of factors including individual motivation and skill, experience of learning, the nature of workplace relationships and the organisational environment. This could be called the developmental school. On the other hand there was a strong, though rarely articulated counter movement that saw competency in leadership and management in a mechanistic manner. Mechanistic interpretations of competency can be usefully appropriated for the maintenance or renegotiation of workplace pacts.

Second, action learning approaches which emphasised reflection and open dialogue challenged the hegemony of the existing training paradigm. While there is obviously a place for training in accordance with regulatory compliance, there is a danger that the attitude and behaviours that permeate this type of training will infect training that is developed in response to the challenges that emerge as a consequence of de-regulation.

Third, forming robust learning and development partnerships, built on strategic conversations and open dialogue is extremely difficult especially in an environment

with a strong tradition of pacts. Moreover considerable time is needed to allow these to flourish. In themselves pacts are useful devices when it is necessary to maintain the status quo. However they do not provide a framework for ground breaking change. It is more likely that a partnership will achieve this objective but given the long lead times alas it might be too late.

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